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UNMARKED BOXES: A SOLO SHOW

by

Nicole Dietze

Bachelor of Arts
East Stroudsburg University of Pennsylvania, 2008

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

For the Degree of Master of Fine Arts in

Theatre

College of Arts and Sciences

University of South Carolina

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Accepted by:

Steven Pearson, Director of Thesis

Robyn Hunt, Reader

Cheryl L. Addy, Vice Provost and Dean of the Graduate School

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DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to Joshua Maichin and to Ehrentraud Dietze.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

In alphabetical order, thank you to Stan Brown, Matthew Cavender, Robyn Hunt, Steven Pearson, and Jeanette Thomas for inspiration, for joy, and for good taste. To my mentors, thank you for your thoughtful, careful advice. Thank you, Robyn, for reading and responding to the many drafts of my several show concepts—I still have your generous notes. Thank you, Steve, for steadiness and the beautiful square of light.

ABSTRACT

Unmarked Boxes is an original solo show, written during the fall of 2015 and performed on December 2, 3 and 4, 2015 at the Center for Performance Experiment, 718 Devine Street, Columbia, SC, along with seven other solo shows in the showcase, *Light Through a Pinhole*. Examining American perspectives on grief and dying, *Unmarked Boxes* tells the story of a young American woman who struggles to plan and perform a sky burial in the Smoky Mountains of Tennessee.

PREFACE

There is no one moment when the creative process begins. Memory laces through new learning, and hope tips curiosity into investigation. The narrative of my process for *Unmarked Boxes* would be nonsensical without some of these relevancies.

I wrote the spine of *Unmarked Boxes* on Thursday, September 10, 2015, in the surgical waiting room at Palmetto Health in Columbia, South Carolina. My partner, Joshua, was undergoing major hip surgery that might—*might*—restore mobility to his impinged hips and inflamed nerves.

Hospitals are awful places, but this waiting room was citrusy and comfortable. There was lemon water in an attractive pitcher. Lime green splashes softened the grim invitation of the grey carpet. Floor-to-ceiling windows reached twenty feet or more up, showcasing an expansive swath of the bluest sky. One lone bird soared nearby.

I began circling through the story concept as I stared into the blue, watching that bird circle above the hospital. Joshua was under anesthesia, and while the rascal was probably not as close to death as he has ever been, he was under anesthesia for the tenth—*twelfth?*—for the umpteenth time.

Transfixed, I stared up into the blue, blue sky, at the lone bird. What would I do if a mistake were made, if an anesthetic anomaly stopped his heart on the operating table, or arrested his lungs, settling that inconvenient immobility into every joint, forever.

Forever?

That bird arced, soaring, and I heard a memory of my Oma (that's German for "grandmother") saying, "Your Opa watched the birds every day."

My grandfather—my Opa—died slowly over four years of cancer and chemo. When he was too weak to walk, he spent his days in bed, watching the sparrows flocking in the pear trees outside.

"He said to me one day, 'I wish I could fly away, too.' The morning he left, I walked in with his breakfast, and when I saw he was gone, I was mad at him. I yelled at him: 'Couldn't you wait ten minutes to say goodbye?'"

I remember sitting with my Opa later on that morning. I was seven, and as I sat on the bed with my father, I, forgive me, I reached for his quiet heart. I slipped my hand into the neck of his white T-shirt. His soft, hairless skin was responsive but still. I found the place where his heart should have beat, and discovered stillness. My father stiffened and stuttered. Forgive him. He didn't know what to do with me, or what to say. At seven, it was simple for me, matter-of-fact. Opa was gone. But my father struggled to find words to explain what needed no explanation.

And the wings beat at the blue sky.

I never saw my Opa again. I wanted to watch him leave the house when the mortician's gurney came. My sister was supervising us youngsters in the TV room, which had always been "Opa's Room." I heard strange clicks and murmurs, and I wanted to go, to see, but when I stood to slip out, she stopped me. "I want to watch," I said. She froze there, asking with what I heard as horror, "Why?"

Too soon, it was over. Opa was gone, and I hadn't waved goodbye. At the memorial service, there were just photos, and a tiny, impossibly tiny gray box of ash.

So watching the blue above Carolina, the blue above the bird, I had to ask myself:
"what would I do if Joshua left today?"

I could never put Josh in that box, I suddenly knew. I couldn't lie about the size of him in that way, all the vitality of a lifetime flashed into ash, or wasted in embalmment.

That bird, in the blue.

I'd just learned, that week, about the Tibetan practice called "sky burial." Atop a mountain atop the world, monks honor the deceased by feeding them to birds. The ritual is considered an act of compassion for the ecosystem because the vultures, hawks and ravens, fed and full, have no need to take the lives of smaller prey.

And I thought: *why reject nature?* Why deny the nature of cellular energy and the good of food? Why secret away the ones we love once they have left-off being The Way They Were When We Loved them?

So I did the millennial thing, and Googled "Tibetan Sky Burial."

And as I pursued that path, I rolled my memory, worry and love for our almost-lost nature into the story of another young woman, one who *had* lost her lover, whose lover wanted her to fly, and who courageously honored our ancestors and earth with a burial in the sky. With several additions and many edits, that became *Unmarked Boxes*.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

CPE Center for Performance Experiment

SM..... Stage Manager

CHAPTER 1

SCRIPT: UNMARKED BOXES

The actor plays two characters: the STAGE MANAGER, and OPHELIA. The stage is set in five distinct playing spaces. Cloth drapes the set pieces, as though the stage were a home shrouded in dust clothes, awaiting its resident's return. In the first space stage right is a box, inside of which is a pair of pink jelly shoes and an envelope. Center stage is empty. At stage left is a table and chair with a legal pad, pen and cell phone. Upstage right is an armed chair with a simple airplane menu. Far up center, shrouded in darkness, are a corpse and a simple vessel of white stones. Lights up on set stage. Enter STAGE MANAGER, carrying a book of poems by Rumi.

STAGE MANAGER

Unmarked: A Gift.

SM uncovers a box. Now she is Ophelia, in a private space: Magdalene's apartment.

There is an unmarked box.

OPHELIA

What are you doing here?

She opens it. Inside are a note and a pair of pink jelly shoes.

OPHELIA (reading)

Thank you, my love. To sweeten the journey. Look up.

She slips out of the black shoes, and slips on the pinks. A square of light appears center.

She re-drapes the box, steps toward the square of light.

STAGE MANAGER

Birdwings: A Goodbye

In the square of light.

OPHELIA

Thank you all for joining me to today for Magdalene's goodbye. We each say goodbye in a different way. Over the last weeks, Maggie asked me to read to her from Rumi. Every day. I suspect she knew every piece by heart. Then on Wednesday, this was the page she had marked for me. I'll read it to you today.

Ophelia opens to the marked page and reads.

Your grief for what you've lost lifts a mirror
up to where you're bravely working.

Expecting the worst, you look, and instead,
here's the joyful face you've been wanting to see.

Your hand opens and closes and opens and closes.

If it were always a fist or always stretched open,
you would be paralyzed.

Your deepest presence is in every small contracting and expanding,
the two as beautifully balanced and coordinated as birdwings.

Leaves the square. It disappears. Crosses to SL table.

STAGE MANAGER

Working: An Improbable Plan

She uncovers the table and chair, sits. Now Ophelia is in her apartment, at a table, a smallish pad of white paper beside. She is speaking to a telephone prompt:

OPHELIA:

Delta Cares. Delta Cares.

Listens.

Operator. Operator.

Person!

Presses a key on the phone pad.

Hello, Hannah,

Writes down that name, draws a box around it.

My name is Ophelia Fairchild and I have some questions about Delta Cares.

Oh.

Yes, thank you.

Scribbles, filling in the box.

Hi, Joy,

Writes down that name, draws a box around it.

My name is Ophelia Fairchild. I have some questions about air shipping remains.

No, I'm the bereaved.

Well, I was hoping you could help me with that. My understanding is, but I want to be sure... —can you get an un-embalmed body into Tibet? And myself accompanying the remains. No, neither of us are citizens. But she has an EU passport. So we'd have to enter Tibet through China. And we'd wait in China how many days for a visa? Seven. Right.

That's my answer. It's Tennessee then; I'm taking her to Tennessee.

I do. Thank you, I do have someone here working with us. In Chicago—in Illinois, you have to have a funeral director supervising. But thank you for checking for me, Joy,

really, thank you. It was bound to be tricky, wishful thinking, really, but I would have been losing myself tomorrow for not asking. So thank you.

So what's the rate to Knoxville, Tennessee? From the Windy City, any departure point. And the Funeral Director said to ask you about AirTrays. They're the same size as a casket? Durability? Right. Are they recycleable? Right. I mean recycled, the paper, do they used recycled cardboard?

Okay. She weighed 130 when she was living. They didn't tell me if that changes in a body when....Oh. Yes, she's less than 500 for sure, and no coffin, no casket, just the AirTray, right? Un-embalmed, dry ice. How much weight does the Airtray add?

Not in Tennessee, no. No, we don't need a funeral director in Tennessee, the state does not require one, so I will be taking responsibility for the remains once we land. Oh. Yeah, I can –find someone. But. In Knoxville, Delta really won't release her to me? I want to book a seat on the same flight, to fly down with her and be there as soon as possible, it's very important.

Well. There must be a way to make an exception to airline policy to comply with state policy. Shouldn't Delta comply with state policy once we're on the ground? If Delta won't release her to me because of international irregularities, then what if we aren't flying into an international airport? Then international irregularities won't be a factor for the airline, every flight will be domestic. Will you check for me, please? Yes, I'm happy to hold while you talk to legal. I'll stay all day.

Waiting. Humming, "In the Big, Rock Candy Mountain."

Hi Joy, I'm here. I can take her myself in Knoxville? That's fantastic. If. Right. You tell me what paperwork legal needs. Yes, I will have arrangements for transportation on the

ground. I can fax that to you shortly. My funeral director here has that paperwork all ready to go. We can fax it immediately. Is there a form number for that? Form number... Great. So you—someone—will contact me to confirm receipt and we're good to go? Can we run through that? Yes I'm ready to book! Well, what's first thing tomorrow? Can we be in the sky by nine?

SM stands, re-drapes the table and chair. Moves to SR.

STAGE MANAGER

Balanced: A Wake

SM undrapes the airplane seat. The sounds of the sky. They are in flight. Ophelia makes her way down the aisle and into her seat. She tries to recline the seat. There is no button to recline. Unsuccessful, she sits still. A few moments, and she doubts herself; she looks again for the button. She peeks around, to her row-mate beside her, and craning to see ahead and sneak a peek behind at the other passengers. Are their seats all straight up too? Barely conceivable. She gives up. Ophelia is on the window seat. The shade is half up, half down. She lifts the shade. It is very bright. She squints to see beneath the clouds. It is very bright. She lowers the shade halfway. She cups her hands around her eyes, trying to tunnel through the sunlight to see the ground beneath. She looks down the wing, tries to see the side of the plane. Holds still, senses the belly of the plane, wonders what is where. The flight attendant has arrived for beverage service. Ophelia shuts the shade, picks up the in-flight menu, which has been on her lap.

OPHELIA:

Yes, please, Hi, Tim. I'll have,

Well:

How's the turkey?

No rye, right?

Right.

Yeah, so I'll do the turkey and brie ... throw in the Pringles. If I do this whole deal thing,

I can get the cabernet?

Yeah, I see that:

Wine in a can.

You know what, can I get Tennessee Honey?

On the rocks.

No, just ice.

Mmm, yeah.

Oh, the whiskey's premium?

That's fine.

I'm okay with that.

Thank you.

The plane sounds fade away. She pulls out the book of Rumi.

I used to be shy. You made me sing.

I used to refuse things at table. Now I shout for more wine.

In somber dignity, I used to sit on my mat and pray. Now children run through and make faces at me.

SM stands, re-drapes the airplane seat. Moves upstage and center. On the ground is a black shroud, a body underneath. As she speaks, the SM tucks the shroud, outlining the body.

STAGE MANAGER

Coordinated: A Promise. Near Andrews Bald, the Great Smokey Mountains. Elevation, 5,920 feet. 35.5419 degrees North. 83.4933 degrees West.

As SM speaks, she tucks the loose shroud close around Magdalene's form, from head to feet, kissing Magdalene's tucked feet before transforming to Ophelia. Sound of mountain wind. The SM sits, picks up stones. The sound of a hawk nearby. OPHELIA looks. Then she looks up, tracks a soaring bird with her eyes. Stands. Lays small stones one by one, around the body. Sings:

Oh, I'm bound to go where there ain't no snow, where the rain don't fall, the winds don't blow, in the Big Rock Candy Mountain. In the Big Rock Candy Mountain, you never change your socks, and the little streams of alcohol come trickling down the rocks... In the Big Rock Candy Mountain, the jails are made of tin, and you can walk right out again, as soon as you are in... I'm bound to stay where you sleep all day... In the Big Rock Candy Mountain.

She completes the rectangle and pauses at Maggie's head.

I think maybe I'm going to jail for this. That'll be fun. You see me?

Sound of the hawk. She lifts the shroud. Sound fades and blackout.

The square of light comes up again.

STAGE MANAGER

Home: A Breath

Ophelia in the square of light, reading from Rumi, but she knows the words, DA to audience.

OPHELIA

Don't grieve. Anything you lose comes round in another form.

The child weaned from mother's milk

now drinks wine and honey mixed.

God's joy moves from unmarked box to unmarked box, from cell to cell.

Part of the self leaves the body when we sleep

and changes shape.

You might say, "Last night

I was a cypress tree,

a small bed of tulips,

a field of grapevines."

Then the phantasm goes away.

You're back in the room.

I don't want to make anyone fearful.

Hear what's behind what I say.

Fade to dark, the pink shoes fading last.

.

CHAPTER 2

WRITING PROCESS: RESEARCH AND REVISION

It is difficult to say precisely where the research for this piece began. I think that *Unmarked Boxes* was my attempt to carve a line through the palpable tension in my world. The thread I sensed tugging underneath the matters that occupied my mind and heart was a question of compatibility: are we humans compatible with the global society we are building? Struggles for social justice, for basic care, for survival ask that the privileged in our growing society listen with compassion to the voices of those whose difference is simple: it is need. As I spent the summer of 2015 reading international news with a growing appetite, I felt the question compounding: is large-scale social cooperation compatible with individual will? Is assimilation into global standards helping our human experience? These aren't new questions. But as I began to consider the pace of population growth and migration and food shortages and war, I urgently questioned the loss of sustainable, localized customs and practices.

As varied as the topography of our Earth and as diverse as its people are, there is one inevitability in our human condition, and that is death. That there are many, many perspectives on death and dying, despite its universality, seemed relevant to my questions. There seemed to be a reconciliation to the tension of life glimmering within a society's regard for death.

2.1 RESEARCH

A week before I began writing *Unmarked Boxes*, I heard NPR's September 2, 2015 Morning Edition, "Fasting to Death: Is It A Religious Rite or Suicide?" (See Appendix 1 for a link to the transcript). The story covered a High Court ruling in Mumbai that banned the fasting ritual of santhara, a sacred practice for four million Jains in India. Members of Jainism who are near death may choose santhara, a rite of abstaining from food. The piece quotes A. K. Jain, a spokesperson for the religion, explaining: "'Not eating' is a nonviolent way to detach from this life and prepare for the next... We are thinking of the next journey. You see in all religions the art of living is taught—how to live a good life. But in no religion it is taught how to die. So santhara is basically the art of dying." The High Court deemed the rite to be suicide, which is illegal in India, and banned it. Following the ruling, documentary-maker Shekhar Hattangadi said, "In Jainism there is not the sense that God has claim on life. Jains accommodate a willing renunciation of the body and the best way to leave it." He believed the High Court's interference demonstrated an incompatibility between Eastern religions and a Western legal code inherited from British rule: "[The] contradiction is between a statute founded largely on a Christian inspired bioethics and the essentially Eastern variant of the idea of spiritual advancement through abstinence and denunciation." When I began writing *Unmarked Boxes*, I was thinking about the necessary passage into death, and about the legality of the "right" to live and, thus living, to also approach death as one deems most honorable to one's own conscience. However, I did not use the story as direct source material.

During that same week, colleague Matthew Cavender introduced the topic of Tibetan sky burials, planting the seed for the shape of *Unmarked Boxes*. A Google search turned up Seth Faison's *New York Times* article, "Lirong Journal; Tibetans, and Vultures, Keep Ancient Burial Rite." With grueling specificity, Faison describes a Buddhist monk butchering a corpse and feeding it to vultures. I was so repulsed that I had to ask myself, "why do I feel this way?" This *why* became the thread for *Unmarked Boxes*, and I attempted to write a piece that questioned my revulsion. Why does honoring the dead in my culture mean denying the nature of an organic body, namely decomposition? Why do we prevent decomposition with embalming chemicals? What struggle would one face to return a body to the carbon cycle in a way that did not mask or thwart decomposition? What would an American audience think about an American woman who exposed her loved one's body to the elements?

Inspired to create a woman to tackle that task, I explored the logistics of sky burial. What were the public health risks? How does one transport a body afar? What authorities maintain control of remains?

First, I needed to consider the morality of sky burial in a culture or climate unsuited to the practice. Would it be dangerous to perform a sky burial? I found that it would not, because decomposition poses a low public health risk. In the editorial, "Unseating the Myths Surrounding the Management of Cadavers," The Pan American Health Organization advises that most fears about contamination and noxious vapors from decomposing flesh are unfounded. The PAHO recommends that, following a catastrophe, responding agencies should reunite victim's bodies with their loved ones,

rather than rushing them to burial or cremation to avoid decomposition. So, then, if my character chose a sky burial, she would not be creating a health hazard.

However, would certain authorities prevent her from performing a sky burial? Within the United States, some states and townships have strident regulations regarding after-death care, while others have little to no legislation on the matter (Kaleem). New York and Illinois, for example, require that families employ a licensed funeral director to handle all after-death care. But I found that Tennessee, in particular, has very little legislation on after-death care. Tennessee allows families to retain possession of their deceased and bury them on private property, provided burial is a specific distance from sources of water.

So, some American families do make “alternative” decisions about after-death care, as investigated in Jaweed Kaleem’s article, “Home Funerals Grow As Americans Skip the Mortician for Do-It-Yourself After-Death Care.” One family, the parents of nine-year-old Caroline, struck me as particularly courageous, and I was moved by the description of their at-home service: “Doug sang Caroline’s favorite song, one that would always soothe her in times of pain: ‘Big Rock Candy Mountain.’ It tells the story of a hobo’s idea of paradise.”

Using this research as the map for my character's journey, I wrote three scenes showing my character, (who I named Ophelia, after the Shakespearean Ophelia who loses herself to grief), grappling with the practical tasks of planning and performing a sky burial. These scenes were my first draft, which I called *Waiting Rooms*.

2.2 THE FIRST DRAFT: *WAITING ROOMS*

At the completion of *Waiting Rooms*, the emerging themes of the piece were grief, courage, loss, determination, mystery and faith. Three scenes long, the piece was rather cinematic, with sudden shifts between scenes. In my mind's eye, the piece was bright with the rich blues and greens of the Smokey Mountains of Tennessee (see image in Appendix C).

Recently, I came across Tennessee Williams' notes for the designer preceding *Cat on A Hot Tin Roof*. His words express what I sensed was true of the design for *Waiting Rooms*: "I thought about the set for this play, bringing also to mind the grace and comfort of light, the reassurance it gives, on a late and fair afternoon in summer, the way that no matter what, even dread of death, is gently touched and soothed by it. For the set is the background for a play that deals with human extremities of emotion, and it needs that softness behind it" (Williams xiii). In my sensibility, the vibrant hues of nature and sunlight would juxtapose the representation of grief we are accustomed to seeing (usually dim, stark and greyscale). Thus, while the content was dark and dreadful—perhaps repulsive—the design was bright, joyful and alive. "Go on with life," was perhaps the mantra of *Waiting Rooms*.

In *Waiting Rooms*, Ophelia's determined struggle against the revulsion and horror I had questioned in myself was obvious. The mountaintop goodbye (called III. Forest) was the most important moment of the play. The final, difficult decision to unshroud Magdalene was its climax, with the unshrouding the breath of realization.

However, the set design I'd envisioned was beyond the scope of my skill and resources for the solo production. When I came to realize the necessary parameters of

sharing the stage and backstage with seven other solo shows each evening, I believed I wouldn't be able to achieve vibrant color and realism. So I tried to transfer the concept to a minimal design concept. However, working with that minimalism gave me exactly what I hadn't wanted in a piece about grief: stark greyscale. So I needed other joys and colors to soften the piece.

2.3 REVISIONS INTO *UNMARKED BOXES*

I found that softness in poetry by Rumi, who celebrates unity with the divine by calling for joy. Three pieces in particular caught me: "Birdwings," "On Children Running Through," and "Unmarked Boxes." These poems express a profound understanding of joy, love and transformation. I tried to give Ophelia that deep understanding, beyond even my own understanding.

Structurally, I had to make room for three new chunks of text. I chose to directly address the audience with the new text, inviting them to participate in the story as friends of Magdalene and Ophelia. And when using direct address, why not lean on the masters? Inspired by *Our Town*, I also added the character of the Stage Manager. Much like Wilder's Stage Manager, mine invited the audience into the story, guiding them through the changes in time and place, and providing a confident, omniscient presence to support their innocence of the backstory.

Visually, I needed to balance the new minimalistic design with color. Inspired by a childhood memory, I found pink jelly shoes. The color reminded me of candy. I hoped that, leading into "On Children Running Through," and "Big Rock Candy Mountain," the shoes would prepare the audience for some visions or memories of childhood joy.

The addition of the pink shoes and, later, bright red cloth over the playing spaces offset the monochrome of our CPE performance space. But, having said goodbye to the blues and greens for the mountaintop goodbye, I had to reconsider how that scene would play.

In the revised mountaintop goodbye, I replaced effort altogether with ritual, hoping that Ophelia's deeper-than-my-own understanding of Rumi's call to joy would communicate through her careful, gentle execution of a goodbye ritual. I cut almost all of her address to Magdalene, keeping Caroline's "Big Rock Candy Mountain" lullaby, and adding a ritualistic outline of white stones to create an "unmarked box" that both hallowed and released the significance of Magdalene's empty body.

In October, playwright Dipika Guha joined us for a writing workshop. She advised that the writer's task is to teach the audience how to hear the play. So I read my draft with empty ears, to hear what the audience might grow accustomed to listening for by its conclusion. As I did, I found that I needed to clarify the play's most important moment. I decided that it was no longer the mountaintop goodbye, but instead the final invitation from Rumi: "Don't grieve." I understood that the new themes of this second draft were joy, balance, child-like acceptance, and transformation. Working backward through my draft, I made small edits that would prepare the audience to receive Rumi's final call to joy. For instance, I changed the telephone operator's name to Joy, "sweetened" the journey, and wove in phrases that would be repeated in "Big Rock Candy Mountain" and the poems.

This process of research and revisions (the writing itself is mysterious—the first scenes flowed out in an afternoon) created a document that was very personal to my

perspective. Finding what would communicate during performance had to wait for December's audiences.

CHAPTER 3

STUDIO PROCESS

Transforming *Unmarked Boxes* the document into *Unmarked Boxes* the solo play required that I take the text into the studio and play it in three dimensions. My protectiveness as writer had to soften to allow my director and actor selves to see the play less intimately, as an audience might. During these staging and technical rehearsals, the technical requirements of “Coordinated” and the piece’s pacing posed challenges.

3.1 MYSTERY

Understanding that technical efficiency was necessary for the success of all the solo shows sharing the theatre during the run, I designed my set with all pieces onstage throughout. However, keeping all set pieces (including Magdalene) onstage throughout presented the challenge of preserving mystery. (When writing, I hadn’t considered how to get Magdalene onstage at all, so this is a technical question for all future mountings of *Unmarked Boxes*).

With Magdalene onstage throughout, preserving the mystery of the ending was a struggle. Exposing her body to the elements was the task that asked my initial question: “Why are we repulsed?” I needed the audience to be curious about what Ophelia’s journey was working towards. I didn’t want to shock them, but neither did I want to invite anticipatory judgments along the way. But the Magdalene set piece had to be onstage throughout. To disguise Magdalene, I loosely draped her in black cloth, hoping

that the vague shape between black shroud and black stage would not draw the audience's focus until the top of "Coordinated."

I also applied misdirection by shrouding all of the set pieces. All of the furniture was draped with bright red cloth. I enjoyed this solution, because it created a pattern of unshrouding. This taught the audience to expect unshrouding (perhaps preparing them to understand Magdalene's unshrouding as a revelation), but without giving the secret away too soon. At the top, the shrouded set also reminded me of an empty house draped with dust cloths once its occupants have gone away. This seemed fitting, inviting the audience into the understanding that someone (Magdalene) had left.

3.2 PACING

During the writing stage, I'd imagined the scenes swiftly rolling together, like an edited film, and hadn't addressed the technical transitions between scenes. Cutting scripted costume changes helped pick up the pace, but removing and replacing the set shrouds took time. The pace of my interactions with the fabrics became the metronome of the piece. My acting challenge between scenes was to move quickly and efficiently, but with skill and dignity. The dialogue I'd written also included much stillness and listening, which, set to the metronome of the set changes, played ponderously.

So it was that studio work brought *Unmarked Boxes* off the page and into three dimensions. However, under the gaze of the audience, I felt more changes were useful.

CHAPTER 4

PERFORMANCE ANALYSIS

After viewing the recording of *Unmarked Boxes*, I feel it wasn't balanced to my satisfaction. My attempts to give Ophelia an understanding deeper than my own may have created a stoic performance. As actor and director I was privy to *Waiting Rooms*, but not savvy enough to excise it from my perception of *Unmarked Boxes*. The result was a lingering connection where the themes of the two pieces diverged. Replacing Ophelia's vigorous determination of the first draft with acceptance in the second resulted in playing "not grief" instead of playing "joy." If I were to do this piece again, all else as it was, I would feed the fierce passion that flows underneath Ophelia's determination, and direct myself towards joy in the mountaintop goodbye.

4.1 WORK IS NEVER DONE

After the first performance, I was dissatisfied with a last-minute change I'd made in the studio. As written, at the top of "Coordinated," the Stage Manager tucked the shroud snugly around the body. This reversed the established "unshrouding" pattern, playing like a dissonant chord building suspense. The tucking-in also signified Ophelia's unseen efforts in transporting and preparing the body. However, during rehearsals, that significance wasn't reading and tucking seemed like an "extra step," so I cut it. The video, recorded on opening night, shows this performance.

However, uncomfortable with the loss of that acknowledgement of Ophelia's effort, and missing the specificity of the curved human outline bordered by a "box" of

white stones, I reworked the tucking. In the final version, the Stage Manager tucked and prepared with gentle calm, finishing with a kiss to the tucked feet. I hope this gesture invited the presence of love into the space while communicating that the Stage Manager's omniscience was not without compassion.

4.2 DESIGN & TECHNICAL REQUIREMENTS: THE SACRED SURPRISE

In February 2016, I had an opportunity to perform *Unmarked Boxes* in a different space. However, I worried that the space would be unable to accommodate the mystery necessary for setting Magdalene and honoring the mystery of the unshrouding. Lacking the opportunity to rehearse and trouble-shoot to my satisfaction, I withdrew *Unmarked Boxes* from the showing. I anticipate that, to mount the piece again, I would be highly selective about the space, and I would require substantial time to rehearse in the space.

I really want *Unmarked Boxes* to honor the sacredness of the natural body. If I could have tried anything, I would have tried a nude Magdalene beneath the tarp. Because it was a solo show, I couldn't have another actor to play Magdalene. So, I wrote the opposite, cutting the lights away right as Ophelia began to lift the black shroud, before the dummy body was revealed. However, during staging, I was so pleased by the movement of the shroud that I went with the on-stage reveal of a neutral dummy prop. With another opportunity, I would choose to try either a live nude actor or a sudden darkness.

4.3 CONCEPTS FOR ONE-HOUR ADAPTATION

An adaptation for a one-hour show might make space to rework my design and theme concerns. With enough material to make a full-length show, I would seek a designer to find that "grace and comfort of light...on a late and fair afternoon in

summer.” The seed of *Waiting Rooms* that lives in *Unmarked Boxes* “needs that softness behind it.” To grow the piece into a full-length show, I would lengthen some scenes and add others, which I’ve conceptualized.

“Unmarked: A Gift” would be much longer, and would play in the same location as “Working: An Improbable Plan,” in the home Ophelia shared with Magdalene.

“Unmarked: A Gift” would allow the audience to see Ophelia at home, developing their understanding of her and establishing the backstory.

In “Working,” there is a lot going on, despite the physical stillness. The legal and corporate authorities that limit Ophelia’s choices in honoring Magdalene’s body were compelling presences to me during the writing. But I think the significance of the conflict between social cooperation and individual will were lost in how hard the audience had to listen to follow the one-sided telephone dialogue. There is another scene, or an addition to the preceding scene, necessary to introduce the audience to the rather large topics of social cooperation and personal liberty.

Preceding “Coordinated,” I would add a scene in which Ophelia chooses the clearing alone. In this scene, she discovers this clearing, chooses it, and makes her initial preparations. The following day, she returns with Maggie for “Coordinated.” In this way, I would make space for the practical efforts and pragmatism which Ophelia would have to find in order to choose and prepare the space. This scene, or the contrast with “Coordinated” would give greater space for the “human extremities of emotion” that were so soft in *Unmarked Boxes*.

4.4 A MORAL CONCERN: PERFORMING QUESTIONS OF CULTURAL ASSIMILATION IN A WHITE BODY

All in all, one of the questions that guided me into this piece, sparked most specifically by India's ban on *santhara*, regarded forced assimilation. In the scope of *Unmarked Boxes* as it stands, I only alluded to assimilation. But by allowing that thread to remain an allusion, I feel that what I actually performed (what could be sensed and received) was akin to cultural appropriation.

As I began writing my solo show, my heart was in a place of great honor for ancestors all around the world. I experience a sense of loss over ancient and medieval European subcultures that assimilated into the larger Western Imperialist ideology. I miss my own lost Celtic culture (both the Irish and German were Celtic peoples at one time). I feel there is a great deal of spiritual wisdom lost through assimilation into the ideology that has evolved into the hungry American capitalist ideology I experience.

However, those losses are not directly addressed in *Unmarked Boxes*. What it does show clearly is a white character, written by a white playwright, attempting a Tibetan-style sky burial, with textual allusions to Tibet and China. Without acknowledging that the character has *lost* something human of her culture, which she is trying to replace, the piece is disrespectful. Because, without directly acknowledging my lost European tribal heritage, the piece, existing as it does within the social framework created by American capitalism, may, instead, communicate that ideology's possessive exoticism of the "primitive" and the "other".

To move forward with *Unmarked Boxes*, I would have to make revisions that bring these issues to the surface. Cultural loss and assimilation would have to be specific themes for this concept to work for me again.

CHAPTER 5

ARTIST'S CONCLUSION

At the conclusion of this project, I find myself dissatisfied with the play-product, but strengthened as the artist-product. It seems to me that the product of this process was less the solo show itself, less the performance or the potential for further performances, and more the artist who writes from the perspective I do today.

With *Unmarked Boxes*, I attempted to tackle broad concepts. The inspiration for the process was deeply personal and specific. Trying to funnel those large ideas through a response to my own specific griefs (the loss of a grandparent, the loss of family, the loss of my partner's spontaneity and joy) created a bottleneck for the ideas. Attempting to fit all that in a fifteen-minute show was wild, first-timer's hubris. But despite a sense that I lost the truth of the piece I'd conceived, I gained perspective on my voice as an artist.

If our planet is shrinking, that is, if Earth's fertility is decreasing as our human population is increasing, then we humans are on quite a ride. Regardless of causality, right this moment, millions upon millions of us suffer war, food shortages, risky migrations and homelessness. It seems to me that while American society participates in the inevitably growing and connected global society, it is useful to contemplate the inevitability of death and dying. Perhaps contemplation can usher relief, or enlightenment, or shifting priorities on what it means to *live*. Perhaps, rather than suffering the grief of cultural loss with anger and denial, we could accept the transition productively and compassionately. Considering these existential social dilemmas is what

theatre is for, after all. The American theatre has a place in helping society through inevitable changes.

In struggling to mount and explain *Unmarked Boxes*, I have encountered my voice as an artist. I have a sense of what attracts and empowers me and the tools and specificities that will help me navigate the process of mounting another new work in our changing, ancient world.

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APPENDIX A

DRAFT 1: WAITING ROOMS

Characters

Seen:

Ophelia

Unseen:

Magdalene

Andrew

Roger

Flight Attendant

I. Home

This is the part where Ophelia books the flight.

The stage is almost empty. Ophelia is in her apartment, at a table, laptop open in front of her, papers and notepaper spread beside. There's a soft glow on her face from the screen. She is speaking to a telephone prompt:

OPHELIA:

"Delta Cares. Delta Cares." Listens. "Operator. Operator." *Listens. Presses a key on the phone pad.* Hello, Andrew," *(writes down his name)* "My name is Ophelia MacNamara and I have some questions about Delta Cares. Oh. Yes, thank you." *(scratches out the name. Waiting)* "Hi, Roger," *(writes down his name)* "My name is Ophelia MacNamara. I have some questions about transporting—about Delta Cares. No,

a family member." *Listening.* "Well, I was hoping you could help me with that. My understanding is, but I want to be sure... —can you get a body into Tibet? Yes."

Listening "No, neither of us." *Lots of listening.* "I see. Right. No. Right. We do. Thank you, I do have that, I have someone here, in Chicago, you, in Illinois, you have to—It's—It was a long shot. Chance. Reach. But thank you for checking for me, Roger, really, thank you, I would have been beating myself up tomorrow for not asking. What's the rate to Tennessee? Knoxville. Chicago, any departure. Uhhhh—Well—The Funeral Director said to ask you about AirTrays? Are they recycleable? Right. Recycled, the paper, do they used recycled cardboard? Do you know where they're sourced from? Okay. She's, alone, about 130. Well. I don't know if it changes. Oh, no, yeah, she's less than 500 for sure, coffin and everything, even if we were going that way. But, yeah, we want the AirTray. Okay." (*Waiting.*) "In Tennessee, no. No, my understanding is that we don't need anyone there, that's not the state requirement in Tennessee? Oh. Oh. Yeah, I can—I can—I'll find someone. You really can't release her to me? I want to book a flight on the same flight. A seat on that plane. To fly down at the same time and be there. Today. Tonight. Right away. Well there's got to be a way to make an exception to let me take her. Like, if the state policy is one thing, can't the airline release into state policy once it's on the ground there?" *Listening.* What about not an international airport? What if it's smaller? Will you check for me, please? Yeah, I'll hold, I'm happy to hold." (*Waiting.* *Makes notes on pad. Googles. Skims through some web pages, cross referencing.* *Humming or whistling, "In the Big, Rock Candy Mountain."*) "Hi Roger, I'm here. Right. Right. Right. Yes, I can have that to you, do I bring it with me to the gate? Yeah we can fax it. Sure. Yes. Is there a form number for that, is that a particular form that he has on

hand that will have all that information on it? Sure, okay, yeah. All those details, everything. So you—or someone at the airport here, or the corporate office—will contact me to confirm receipt and we're good to go? Sure. Well, what's first thing tomorrow? Can we get out before nine?" *Blackout.*

II. Sky

On the plane. This is the part where Ophelia denies herself three times.

The sounds of the sky as lights come up. They are in flight, just reached altitude.

Ophelia is trying to recline the seat. She searches the arm rests for the button.

Unsuccessful, she sits. A few moments, and she doubts herself; she looks again for the button, running her hands along the arm rests. She peeks around, to her row-mate beside her, and craning to see ahead and sneak a peek behind at the other passengers. Are their seats all straight up too? Barely conceivable. She gives up.

Ophelia is on the window seat. The shade is half up, half down. She lifts the shade. It is very bright. She squints to see beneath the clouds. It is very bright. She lowers the shade halfway. She cups her hands around her eyes, trying to tunnel through the sunlight to see the ground beneath. She looks down the wing, tries to see the side of the plane. Holds still, senses the belly of the plane, wonders what is where.

The flight attendant has arrived for beverage service. Ophelia shuts the shade, picks up the in-flight menu, which has been on her lap.

OPHELIA:

"Yes, please, Hi. I'll have, well, how's the turkey? No rye, right? Right. Yeah, so I'll do the turkey club and Pringles. If I do this whole deal thing, I can get the cabernet? Yeah, I see that: it *is* in a can. You know what, can I get Jack Daniels? Ice would be

awesome. No, just ice. I have water still from the gate. This water's a commodity, right? Mmm, yeah." (Confirming the order). "Oh, it's a premium one? That's fine, I'm okay with that." (*That the Jack is a premium brand; no value deal*). "Thank you." *Smiles. Seat-mate passes on service and the attendant moves up to the next row. Ophelia looks at the menu again. Lights fade.*

III. Forest.

The Smoky Mountains of Tennessee. A remote rocky ledge overlooking a green valley.

Sounds of the Smokey Mountains: birds, squirrels, and maybe, far away, a road.

On the ground is a shroud, a body underneath. Near the edge of the stage (upstage or extreme periphery) is rolling gurney of some kind, maybe home-made, with heavy-duty tires. Ophelia stands some ten or so feet off, taking in the body in the context of the hugeness of the sky, the valley, the green.

OPHELIA:

It's so huge, Maggie. Look! It's so big. I don't know what to do now. I can't believe I didn't get this far. I got so far! I got us here. It's like you said. The earth, the sky. We're on top of the world. *She sees a hawk above, far above, tracks him with her eyes.* They see you, baby. We see you.

Sings: Oh, I'm bound to go where there ain't no snow, where the rain don't fall, the winds don't blow, in the Big Rock Candy Mountain. In the Big Rock Candy Mountain, you never change your socks, and the little streams of alcohol come trickling down the rocks...In the Big Rock Candy Mountain, the jails are made of tin, and you can walk

right out again, as soon as you are in... I'm bound to stay where you sleep all day... In the Big Rock Candy Mountain.

I think maybe I'm going to jail for this. O my god, Magdalene, what is this fucking hipster crap? Why couldn't I just bury you? In a nice little cemetery, by a nice little lake, or scatter your ashes *[here]*? Let us all inhale you! This is really fucked up and I don't even know why I'm doing it. I do. I love you too. Fuck me. I love you, too."

She touches Maggie.

"Naked we came. From dust to dust. From earth unto the same. Earthandsky, take Maggie back again."

She gets ready to lift the shroud. She looks up once more; the bird is still circling.

"They see you, baby. We see you."

She begins to lift the shroud. Blackout.

APPENDIX B

VISUAL INSPIRATION



Figure B.1: Inspiration for Set Design: The Smoky Mountains of Tennessee